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SUBJECT: READY OR NOT HERE COMES THE OPPOSITION PRIMARY

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT R. DOWNES FOR 1.4 (D)

Summary

¶1. (C) After months of planning, Sumate announced its intention to hold a primary to choose a single opposition candidate on July 16. As of May 22, 14 candidates have registered, including Julio Borges, one of the three best known possible candidates. The other two, Teodoro Petkoff and undeclared candidate Zulia Governor Manuel Rosales, publicly oppose the idea. Some opposition parties and NGOs have expressed concern about potential risks, particularly low voter turn out due to fear of government retaliation and the possibility of accenting opposition divisions. They recommend considering other options to choose the opposition candidate, such as polling. While the critics make some reasonable arguments, the primaries, if successful, could result in a popularly chosen leader that could set the stage for the opposition's arduous task of rebuilding. End Summary.

Sumate Outlines Primary Plans

¶2. (U) After months of planning, Sumate announced its intention to hold a primary to choose a single opposition candidate on July 16. According to Sumate President

Alejandro Plaz and Vice President Maria Corina Machado, the organization will have 3,000-4,000 voting centers, and some 35,000 volunteer poll workers and political party witnesses. Voters registered as of November 2003 and those who have turned 18 since then would be allowed to participate. (Note: The November 2003 electoral registry was the last to include voter addresses.) Post received a copy of a letter from Sumate that indicates the NGO is currently soliciting communities for volunteers and suggestions for voting centers.

13. (U) Candidate registration began the week of May 15. As of May 22, 14 aspiring candidates have registered for the primary including Julio Borges and other lesser profile candidates, such as William Ojeda, Cecilia Sosa, Omar Calderon, Vicente Brito, and labor leader Frolian Barrios. Teodoro Petkoff and undeclared candidate Zulia Governor Manuel Rosales remain publicly opposed to the idea. Candidates that have signed up for the event are reviewing Sumate's proposed norms for participation, which will be publicly released within a couple of weeks, according to Machado.

Pros

14. (SBU) Plaz and Machado champion the primaries as the best way to mobilize opposition supporters by allowing them to choose their representative through a transparent process. Some polls seem to support this argument. For example, pollster Alfredo Keller says a potential candidate chosen via

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primary could capture 52 percent of the vote. Ceca polling firm puts the figure even higher, at around 70 percent. Choosing a candidate before the candidate registration period (August 5-24) will end internal squabbling quicker and give the winner more time to build a voter base, according to the Sumate leaders. They also think the primary will focus candidates on the issues and not just electoral conditions.

15. (C) Sumate, several opposition parties, and some candidates have highlighted other benefits as well. For example, Plaz thinks the primary could strengthen the opposition's ability to fight for fairer electoral conditions by demonstrating that a transparent, manual voting process is possible, contrary to BRV claims. Candidates Borges and Ojeda say it would provide a focal point for negotiating with the CNE, increasing the opposition's leverage. Privately, Keller told PolCouns that the primary's real value would be in its ability to designate a leader that could lead the opposition's rebuilding over the next few years. Another contact speculated that having Sumate, which he described as an abstention-promoting organization, lead the search for an opposition candidate might encourage abstentionists to participate in the process.

Some Say Not So Fast

16. (U) Not everyone in the opposition is on board with the idea. Petkoff and Rosales say the primary should come later in the race to allow all candidates a chance to present their platforms. If a leading candidate has not naturally emerged after a few months, then they say they might agree to a primary. A scathing editorial in Petkoff's Tal Cual daily blasted Sumate for not consulting first with opposition parties and candidates before designing and announcing the primary. Abstentionists such as Accion Democratica say the opposition should focus on securing the opposition's ten electoral conditions from the National Electoral Council (CNE) before choosing a candidate, because if the CNE does not concede to their most important demands, there is no point in participating.

¶7. (U) Some parties and NGOs have recommended examining other methods for choosing a single candidate before committing to a primary. NGO Education Assembly and opposition party Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) favor using fall polling data to make the decision. Grupo La Colina, a pro-opposition electoral NGO, compared several methods of picking a candidate, including primaries, polls, and natural consensus across seven factors: variety of opinions included, time allowed to become familiar with the candidate, risk of BRV retaliation against participants, political cost, economic cost, potential of BRV manipulation, and the likelihood of strengthening the winner's image as a viable political alternative. Of the three options, a primary was the least desirable, while polling ranked first.

Other Cons

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¶8. (C) Privately, poloffs' contacts have highlighted several risks similar to the Colina study. The most serious concern is the potential for low voter turnout as many opposition supporters may fear that participants will be catalogued, creating another Tascon List. Pollster Luis Vicente Leon noted that the government could easily promote this fear by pretending to watch participants or insinuating that it will. Chavez could then use the low turn out against the candidate to paint him as the representative of the elite minority. Since the primary will be open to all voters, Leon also notes that Chavez could skew the results by announcing on the eve of the vote which candidate he would like to run against, thus encouraging his supporters to vote for someone unlikely to win broad opposition support or someone Chavez knows he can easily defeat.

¶9. (C) Another common concern is that the primary would expose the winner's vulnerabilities, making it easier for Chavez, a superb political tactician, to exploit. Leon warned the CNE could also threaten to take over the event, if it felt that it might be shown up by Sumate. Jacquie Mosquera, project assistant for NGO Hagamos Democracia (Let's Make Democracy!), cites past precedent that the winner of previous primaries has usually lost the general election. She cited Oswaldo Alvarez Paz' 1994 presidential bid as an example. (Note: Alvarez Paz ran against Eduardo Fernandez in a primary to become Copei's presidential nominee.) In addition, getting the sometimes backbiting opposition to respect the results may be a challenge, particularly if the winner is chosen by only a few votes.

¶10. (C) Sumate also appears to face several logistical hurdles. In March, Plaz admitted to PolCouns that finding voting places would be difficult since prospective voting centers would have to offer nervous voters some assurance against being watched. Traditional voting centers, such as schools, community centers, government buildings, and even street corners would be out of the question. Our conversations with Sumate leaders about the voting process suggests they may not have thought through some important details, such as how to avoid diluting the candidate list with too many entrants or prevent Chavistas from stacking the vote against a potentially more viable candidate. Financing is also a problem. While Plaz claims volunteers will work for free, Sumate still needs money to rent out facilities, print ballots, provide materials, such as voting boxes, indelible ink, tables and chairs. While respecting the expertise Sumate has in electoral matters, Mosquera--who has worked with Sumate--expressed concern about the organization's the capacity to successfully run the primary. It is also possible that the cautious Sumate leadership is not showing all its cards now, even to us.

Comment

¶11. (C) The primary contains many risks. Sumate may have difficulty relieving voter fears of BRV retaliation and the logistics may be more of a challenge than the organization

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expects. Although it was able to coordinate thousands for the 2003 signature drive to recall President Chavez, the primary comes in the era of the Tascon and Maisanta lists and dwindling funds for the opposition. In addition, absent some dramatic development the winner has little chance of winning this year's election, given Chavez' control of the electoral system. Still, if the primary is a success, a leader chosen by the people instead of the discredited opposition leadership could begin to erase the opposition's image as a closed-door society and set the stage for the arduous task of rebuilding.

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